



The Reading Matrix © 2010
Volume 10, Number 1, April 2010

Beyond Grammar: Language, Power, and the Classroom

Mary R. Harmon & Marilyn J. Wilson

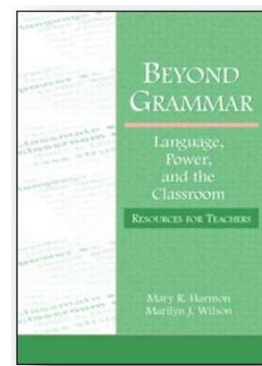
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ (2006)

Pages: ix + 231

ISBN: 0-8058-3715-9

Cost: \$ 25.95

Reviewed by Osman Z. Barnawi
Yanbu Industrial College



Language and power are closely related to one another. This issue is commonly concerned with “the connections between language use and unequal relations of power” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 1). In other words, opportunities and motivations for using and learning a particular language relies upon its relative power and status whether symbolic or practical, which cannot be separated from the relative socio-economic and political power that it represents.

In response to that issue, Harmon and Wilson offer a collection on how teachers should think of connecting social, cultural, and political dimensions with their own classrooms. It is obvious that this book provides a foundation for understanding language, power and the classroom altogether, and it is designed for language educators and practicing language teachers so that they understand the relationships among language, power and the classroom better.

This book is comprised of seven chapters, which address (1) how language is shaped by ideological and political power; (2) what knowing a language means; (3) the power of words; (4) hate language and bully language; (5) language and gender; (6) dialects; and (7) English language learners, bilingualism, and linguistic imperialism. Each chapter of the book contains personal exploration and teaching exploration. The former encourages readers to explore the issues discussed, and the latter allow readers (teachers) to connect the content of the chapter with their teaching situation. In other words, both personal exploration and teaching exploration help readers interact with the text.

In Chapter 1, the authors introduce six language myths: (1) transparency of language, (2) language equals the sum of its grammatical structures, (3) the linguistic superiority of some languages, dialects, and patterns of linguistic behavior, (4) the passivity of language learning, (5) traditional, prescriptive grammar as the ideal basis of language study, and (6) language as a neutral entity. These myths provide a useful basis for understanding how language is perceived as a representation of ideological and political power and authority. As the authors argue, “language is never ideologically free, nor politically neutral” (p. 8).

Chapter 2 examines theoretical concepts of language as system--how it is phonologically, morphologically, syntactically, and semantically constructed; of language as discourse--how

language either spoken or written fits coherently and cohesively within a communicative context. The remaining sections of the chapter touch on how a language is acquired and how it is connected to thought; the authors refer the latter to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The authors conclude Chapter 2 by taking into account shifting paradigms of language study and the political situations in which such paradigms change. By examining linguistic, socio-cultural, and political dimensions, language teachers are to help learners learn language better.

Chapter 3 sheds crucial light on the power of words and investigates the sources of their power. The authors contend that the idea “words have considerable power to hurt” is common knowledge today. That notion problematizes the old notion “words will never hurt us.” This implies that as words and their meanings serve to link people and build strong emotional and social relationships, words potentially serve to separate people. The authors caution that teachers’ use and abuse of verbal power (e.g., names and labels, euphemisms and doublespeak, charged language, and taboo names), as well as the language of advertisers and politicians, can have great implications for student learning process and the classroom community.

In Chapter 4, Harmon and Wilson address what ‘hate language’ means along with its ‘haters,’ what constitutes ‘hate,’ and how ‘hate’ is verbally manifested. Basically, the authors highlight the power-fraught nature of hate language along with its use in bullying, demeaning, humiliating, and silencing its targets in which media (e.g., the Internet, television, radio, movie, or popular music) and institutions (i.e., governments, education, or religions) serve as agents of permeating hate language at schools. As the authors pinpoint, “language is never neutral: language can create, reinforce, and reinscribe patterns of thoughts” (p. 93). In response to this idea, the authors encourage teachers to consider the issue of hate language, which may affect the way their students use a language at schools as well as in the classrooms.

Chapter 5 highlights how a language at lexical, syntactic, and discursual levels can promote gender stereotypes and gender inequity. To overcome these two issues, the authors suggest pedagogical practices, which promote gender-fair discourse practices in the classrooms through careful selections of print and non-print media as classroom materials. In short, this chapter allows teachers to be aware of how a gender issue can promote gender inequity and stereotype among students.

Chapter 6 argues that linguistic variation is a social phenomenon considering how and why speakers attune their speech based on the addressees’ perceived norms. In other words, linguistic variations are perceived as the way speakers use languages based variably on regional and social spaces. The authors also discuss the politics of language variations (e.g., standard language versus non-standard language) and linguistic prejudice and discrimination. Addressing such issues helps teachers surmount restrictive language environments for culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

The authors conclude the book by pulling together many of the issues of language and power along with their implications for both educational policies and English language learners. Chapter 7 clearly spells out the fact that the use of a particular language is laden with power, status, prestige, and privilege (Bourdieu, 1999; Fairclough, 1989). For this reason, teachers need to help learners to be aware that being multilingual or bilingual speakers are resources for creativity and cognition, not a sign of limitation. Thus, the use of L1 in the classroom should be viewed as a facilitating factor of acquiring L2.

After I read over the book, I have found the book interesting in two instances. First, the authors show a great rejection of the transmission theory of knowledge; for example, grammar teachers act as authorities in classrooms transmitting language knowledge to students. The

authors also dismiss a traditional view of language study that emphasizes only prescriptive grammar without considering socio-cultural dimensions of language use. In this regard, Harmon and Wilson try to promote a development of self-directed learning and active student involvement in the language learning process. From this notion, students are seen as engaged learners who have the right to make their learning decisions in which teachers facilitate students to make decisions about what to learn, thereby building learner autonomy and student-centered teaching and learning process.

Another interesting thing of the book is that the authors call for the implementation of emancipatory and critical pedagogies in the educational system. Such pedagogies empower students by helping them analyze their experience and reduce social inequality and injustice in the classrooms. In turn, the emancipatory and critical pedagogies enable students to find their own voices in the classroom communities and explore alternative ways of thinking that may have deteriorated within a teacher-dominant environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I do believe that emancipatory and critical teaching philosophies help language teachers raise the awareness of the issues of language, power, identity, and cultural sensitivities in schools and in the classrooms.

In conclusion, this book represents a platform for teaching grammar in the classroom in which it emphasizes critical pedagogies. It is a reader-friendly and easy-to-understand resource for language teachers and educators who would like to promote a socio-cultural approach to teaching language.

REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. (1999). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
 Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
 Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Osman Z. Barnawi is doing a Ph.D. in Composition and TESOL at the Department of English, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA. He is an EFL/ESP lecturer at Ynabu Industrial College, Saudi Arabia, and has a M.Ed. in TESOL from the University of Exeter, U.K. His research interests include second language writing, second language learners' identities, critical pedagogy, crisis leadership in higher education, performance assessment in higher education, extensive reading, ESP program evaluation, educational technologies, philosophy of social science, and language teacher education

Email: albarnawim@hotmail.com or obarnawi@yic.edu.sa